

Hip-Hop Dance: Up From the Streets, and Still Spinning

By JENNIFER DUNNING

Published: April 10, 2006

Hip-hop began pushing up through the streets of black and Hispanic communities about three decades ago. Now an industry that has had profound effects on urban American culture, hip-hop has not entirely strayed from its vivid populist roots. Or so "Fest Forward: Hip-Hop Unbound" suggested with a program seen on Friday night at the Skirball Center.



Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times

Kwikstep (Gabriel Dionisio) of Full Circle, part of "Fest Forward."

This first dance program in the wide-ranging festival was thought-provoking and fun. Full Circle, a company created in 1996 by Gabriel (Kwikstep) Dionisio and Ana (Rokafella) Garcia, managed both to educate and to raise the spirits sky-high in song and dance sequences choreographed by the founders. In one segment, Rokafella rapped about the confusions of a young woman torn by a conflict between her hip-hop and Latina heritages embodied by a divided clothes closet. "You never wear us, girl, and we was on sale," a pair of shoes calls out to her reproachfully, but they are spiked-heel shoes more suitable for the office than for cutting loose on a dance floor.

There was haunting a cappella singing from the B Girls (The Wonder Twins, Carefree and Serious; Rokafella; and Jaki Brown) as well as a knockout finale by the full company, which also included Roc-ism, Mach 3, Ken Fury, Martin Rios and Spexx. There were hints of the basketball courts and the African dance that influenced hip-hop dance, but the spectacular concluding spins on all parts of the body recalled nothing so much as fast, ornamented ballet fouettés.

"Gamon," choreographed by Jennifer Weber and performed by her Decadancetheater company, had a little of the piquant wit and costuming of Ms. Weber's earlier "Decadance vs. the Firebird." But not enough. Her ambition and imagination are impressive, as is her belief in the power of hip-hop dance to communicate. But "Gamon," based on a classic Japanese story, was a meandering, too evenly paced series of group and smaller ensemble dances that failed to tell a clear story.

"Fest Forward: Hip-Hop Unbound" continues through Saturday at the Skirball Center at New York University, 566 La Guardia Place, at Washington Square South, Greenwich Village, (212) 279-4200 or www.skirballcenter.nyu.edu.